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Security Council

Seventy-third year

Provisional

8296th meeting
Wednesday, 27 June 2018, 10.20 a.m.
New York

President:	Mr. Nebenzia	(Russian Federation)
Members:	Bolivia (Plurinational State of)	Mr. Inchauste Jordán
	China	Mr. Lie Cheng
	Côte d'Ivoire	Mr. Dah
	Equatorial Guinea	Mr. Esono Mbengono
	Ethiopia	Mr. Alemu
	France	Mr. Delattre
	Kazakhstan	Mr. Umarov
	Kuwait	Mr. Alotaibi
	Netherlands	Mr. Van Oosterom
	Peru	Mr. Tenya
	Poland	Ms. Wronecka
	Sweden	Mr. Skoog
	United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland	Ms. Pierce
	United States of America	Mr. Cohen

Agenda

The situation in the Middle East

Report of the Secretary-General on the review of United Nations cross-border operations (S/2018/617)

Report of the Secretary-General on the implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017) and 2401 (2018) (S/2018/619)

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The meeting was called to order at 10.20 a.m.

Adoption of the agenda

The agenda was adopted.

The situation in the Middle East

Report of the Secretary-General on the review of United Nations cross-border operations (S/2018/617)

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The President (*spoke in Russian*): In accordance with rule 39 of the Council's provisional rules of procedure, I invite the following briefers to participate in this meeting: Mr. Staffan de Mistura, Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for Syria, and Mr. John Ging, Director of the Coordination and Response Division, United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs.

Mr. De Mistura is joining today's meeting via video-teleconference from Geneva.

In accordance with rule 37 of the Council's provisional rules of procedure, I invite the representative of the Syrian Arab Republic to participate in today's meeting.

The Security Council will now begin its consideration of the item on its agenda.

I wish to draw the attention of Council members to document S/2018/617, which contains the report of the Secretary-General on the review of United Nations cross-border operations, and document S/2018/619, which contains the report of the Secretary-General on the implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017) and 2401 (2018).

I give the floor to Mr. De Mistura.

Mr. De Mistura: I thank you, Sir, for this opportunity to address the members of the Security Council. When I last addressed the Council on 16 May (see S/PV.8260), I spoke of three bottom-line priorities: de-escalation, reviving the political process, and bridging the gaps between different groups of international stakeholders through high-level diplomacy because it is now time for high-level diplomacy. I would now like to report on where we stand on each of these elements.

First, with regard to de-escalation, I regret to say that I have very little to report, or rather, very little positive to report. In fact, I am gravely concerned at the turn of events, particularly in the south-west of Syria. In that area, now, while we are talking, we are seeing a full-scale ground offensive in aerial bombardment and exchanges of fire from both sides. I want to believe that the Security Council will not allow this to become another eastern Ghouta or another eastern Aleppo or Aleppo in general, where so many civilians were sacrificed and died. Yet I see things moving in this direction.

Let us be aware of what it would mean if the south-west were to see a full-scale battle to the end. It could be like Aleppo and eastern Ghouta combined in terms of the population in the areas that might be affected. Some 45,000 — almost 50,000, I hear — have already been displaced owing to fighting, mostly from eastern Dar'a governorate to areas near the Jordanian border. This year alone, more than 900,000 people in Syria have been displaced nationwide. It is unimaginable what the situation would be if we added to that number all those who are presently in the eastern Dar'a governorate. My colleague John Ging, whom I see is in the Chamber today, will brief the Council on these issues in greater depth in due course.

We must also think of the regional implications. As Secretary-General António Guterres himself has said, escalation in the south-west poses significant risks to regional security and stability, which is a point I myself have constantly underscored. In fact, regional tensions continue. Just to give Council members one example, on Monday of this week air strikes on Damascus airport were reported, which Syrian State media attributed to Israel. We are not in a position to independently confirm this, nor has Israel made any statement on the matter, but we are concerned that a full-scale battle in the south-west could only add fuel to this type of tensions. Our position on Aleppo, on Ghouta and on other places in Syria has always been to put the sanctity of human — civilian — life above all else.

We have seen months of intensified back-and-forth regional dialogue on the south-west, and we looked at it with interest because we saw and believed that there was some progress. I therefore urge all

parties — the Syrian Government, the armed groups and all interested parties — to draw on the lessons that we all learned from eastern Ghouta, from Ghouta, from Aleppo and elsewhere, and use the channels that already exist — and we know they exist and we know where they are — and work on arrangements that could prevent further human suffering, protect civilians and provide an exit from the potential for a further tragedy in this cruel seven-year-old conflict. I hope we will have an opportunity in private consultations to discuss this issue because we are indeed concerned.

With regard to the constitutional committee, we are beginning to see some movement towards a political process. That is why we are so concerned that military escalation could have the potential to compromise the progress that we are seeing on the political front. During the last month, we have intensified our efforts to find a way ahead for the implementation of the Sochi final statement for the establishment of a Syrian-led, Syrian-owned, United Nations-facilitated constitutional committee within the framework of the Geneva process and in accordance with resolution 2254 (2015).

Four and a half months after the Sochi declaration, on 28 May the Syrian Government provided a catalyst when it conveyed to my office in Damascus 50 names for its Government list. I expressed appreciation to the Syrian Government for this important step. I have also expressed my appreciation to the Russian Federation and the Islamic Republic of Iran, with which I know the Syrian Government has discussed this list and whose encouragement has helped to produce this movement.

After receiving the list, I decided to consult key regional partners in Istanbul, Tehran, Cairo and elsewhere, and I saw senior officials of the countries where those capitals are located, including President Al Sisi of Egypt, as well as officials of the Arab League and opposition leaders. I was in contact with the Russian Federation at several levels, the United States and European countries. On the basis of these useful discussions, I determined that it was now time to take advantage of this initiative of the Syrian Government, step up consultations and go deeper. On 19 June, therefore, I held formal joint consultations at a very senior level in Geneva with the Russian Federation, the Republic of Turkey and the Islamic Republic of Iran. We discussed the best way to implement the Sochi final statement to establish a Syrian-led, Syrian-owned constitutional committee under the auspices of the United Nations in Geneva.

I must say it was a constructive meeting. Much of the discussion concerned the composition of the committee as well as such issues as decision-making and how to avoid deadlocks. The aim was to seek some preliminary understandings. Participants exchanged opinions on these matters in a very interactive and constructive way. Some common ground actually emerged — preliminary, but it emerged. Overall, a spirit of productive negotiation and potential compromise emerged because all three countries recognized the need for a constitutional committee that is credible in the eyes of the international community.

On 22 June I met with an official from the European Union, who provided sound advice, and I will meet shortly with High Representative Mogherini on these issues tomorrow. On 25 June I hosted joint consultations in Geneva with, in alphabetical order, France, Germany, the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, the United Kingdom and the United States. We discussed the de-escalation arrangements in depth, a key element, obviously, that underpins progress on the political front. Views were exchanged on the importance of diplomatic bridging between different groups on Syria and prospects for progress on the constitutional track.

There was a clear expectation on the part of those countries — and let me be frank: they have an interest and a stake in the process and also are the ones who could be important players in any potential reconstruction — that any constitutional committee must be credible and internationally legitimate, it must contain a diverse and representative spectrum of Syrians, including those mentioned in the Sochi final statement, such as independence, civil society, experts and women.

Based on my consultations with many stakeholders, I intend to maintain my prerogative to contribute to adjusting the committee so as to ensure, first, its credibility and secondly, international legitimacy. In terms of women, let me underscore my own expectation that any constitutional committee must include a minimum of 30 per cent women. In this connection, I noted with pleasure that 26 per cent of those on the Government list of 50 names provided to us were women, which is not enough, because we are aiming for 30 per cent, but it is a very good signal. I will certainly not be impressed by the argument that others may raise that there are not enough Syrian women who are competent on constitutional issues. Just yesterday,

for instance, more than 200 Syrian women from diverse backgrounds met in Beirut for a conference organized by UN-Women. Despite their differences, they agreed on many points, including on women's equal participation in decision-making, including in any constitutional committee. I also take note of the recent letter of support for women's full and effective participation, with at least 30 per cent representation, in the constitutional committee, which was sent to us by the representatives of members of the Security Council Peru, Sweden and the United Kingdom.

We now await an opposition list of names, which we hope will be forthcoming shortly. I know that serious work on this issue is being conducted even as we speak. I will be proceeding also to facilitate the process of bridging independence experts, tribal leaders, civil society and women, as indicated in the Sochi declaration, and, frankly, in many of our common deliberations. I should add that both meetings in Geneva underscored one important point that I, too, will underscore: the support of key countries for the role of the United Nations in facilitating the political process in Geneva, including the constitutional committee.

Overall, these consultations represent a cautious step forward, and I have to be cautious, having seen how sometimes we took one step forward and two back. But let me be clear: this is a package, and that is something that we have discussed with everyone: nothing is agreed until everything has been agreed. That is why it is a work in progress. I am also aware that this process will require the consent and engagement of the Syrian Government and parties, with full respect for their concerns and sensitivities — the Government, the opposition and civil society.

For my part, I will continue to facilitate further movement in this direction to seek the support, counsel and advice of many, which is why I anticipate inviting the Sochi co-conveners back to Geneva in the coming weeks, as well as the six countries I saw Monday and others and then report back to the Security Council.

Let me also flag that if we are to move forward with a constitutional process towards what everyone in Syria tells us they want, a safe, calm and neutral environment, it will be important to start to see steps that could restore trust and confidence in social peace. That is why we are concerned when we see unilateral legislative acts such as Law Number 10, which we understand many refugees were very worried about, and frankly I even heard a great deal about this from neighbouring countries such as Lebanon.

We also urge concrete action on the issue of detainees. Today, even as we speak, a technical team from my office is in Ankara for a meeting of the Working Group on the release of detainees/abductees and handover of the bodies as well as the identification of missing persons, of which the United Nations is a member, together with Iran, the Russian Federation and Turkey.

As the Council is aware, so far the outcome has been zero. However, we are not giving up. Today's meeting is already the third meeting of the Working Group, which deals with a key humanitarian issue that affects thousands and thousands of Syrian people. What is necessary now and what we and the Syrian people expect are some concrete steps and results to alleviate the suffering of those affected by this tragic situation. Members of my team who are present in Ankara today will continue proactively to support the Working Group, which was established in Astana. I hope that all actors involved will demonstrate the political will required to produce some results in this field.

In the meantime, we continue to seek ways to bridge different groups of international stakeholders through high-level diplomacy. That is my bottom line, and we have seen that taking place. Serious, robust and sustainable dialogue is vital to underpin de-escalation, which is very much needed now, and the political process in general. I discussed this issue with President Al Sisi in Cairo when I was there, and he gave me some constructive ideas in this regard. I believe that we are already seeing an emerging web of high-level international discussions on Syria: frequent contacts between the United States and the Russian Federation, for instance, at many different levels; communications at a very high level between President Putin and President Macron and President Putin and Chancellor Merkel; and intensified talks between the United States and Turkey over various issues.

All that we can build on. I have shuttled around all relevant capitals recently, so I can say with some authority and confidence that there is some common ground to build upon that could provide a solid basis for some concrete understandings. Many countries are not that far apart on issues that are, frankly, easy to resolve or address, such as national sovereignty, unity and many others, and we have been working on it.

Let me reiterate once again that the United Nations stands ready to use its own good offices, competence and experience — and we have a whole team working on this — in the bridging of commonalities to contribute to facilitating international dialogue in the quest for such commonalities.

In conclusion, we are moving cautiously in the right direction on the political front. I ask for the support of all present, including of the Syrian Government, whose representatives are sitting in the Chamber, in facilitating this effort. Ultimately, this effort must be Syrian led and Syrian owned, because no country or organization can simply impose a fait accompli on the Syrian people. We know that, but we need to move forward.

My second message is that currently we are gravely concerned by the battlefield developments and their potential to expand into regional tensions. Therefore, we urge the Council and all interested parties to help find an arrangement or a solution in the south-west that will spare civilian suffering and large movements of displaced people and reduce the potential tension so that we do not see once again seven years afterwards, perhaps when we are getting closer to the end of the conflict, a repetition of what we saw sadly in Aleppo and eastern Ghouta.

The President (*spoke in Russian*): I thank Mr. De Mistura for his briefing.

I now give the floor to Mr. Ging.

Mr. Ging: Today I will provide the Council with an update on behalf of the Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, Mr. Mark Lowcock.

I would like to start with the alarming developments in southern Syria where violence has escalated sharply last week and heavy artillery and aerial shelling is under way. To date, an estimated 45,000 to 50,000 people have been displaced owing to this fighting, most from eastern Dar'a governorate to areas near the Jordanian border. A number of villages either impacted or fearful of the proximity of the fighting have been almost totally abandoned. According to the World Food Programme, "the number of displaced people could nearly double if violence continues to escalate". Dozens of civilians have reportedly been killed, including children, and many more have been injured.

Attacks have also hit civilian infrastructure causing widespread damage, including an air strike yesterday that rendered a hospital supported by Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) in Al-Hirak city inoperable. According to MSF, that hospital supported 90,000 people and provided more than 15,700 emergency room consultations in the past year alone. Another hospital in eastern Ghariyeh had to suspend operations owing to insecurity. In eastern Maliha, the local health centre and local council building were also both rendered inoperable.

This morning media reports announced that air strikes struck yet another health facility — this time in the town of Jizeh, east of Dar'a city. In addition, Naseeb hospital declared the suspension of its services and the Dar'a Education Directorate announced the adjournment of all classes and examinations. Some 100,000 people in Dar'a city and surrounding villages have been impacted by a complete electricity blackout, which occurred yesterday when Government forces launched an assault on the divided southern city.

Despite the hostilities, the United Nations and its partners continue to provide food, health care, nutrition, education and core relief items to more than 400,000 people in need in southern Syria from across the border in Jordan. Humanitarian partners supporting cross-border operations have been actively planning for such an escalation since the first quarter of the year and supplies are prepositioned in Dar'a and Quneitra governorates. Any further escalation will significantly increase the number of displacements and jeopardize the United Nations capacity to conduct further humanitarian operations. Today, the United Nations cross-border convoy, for example, had to be postponed owing to the bombardments that took place within kilometres of the Jordanian border. I recall in that regard the Secretary-General's own statement last week, underscoring "the fragile situation of civilians in southern Syria" and calling "for an immediate end to the current military escalation". I also call on all stakeholders to ensure that cross-border humanitarian deliveries continue in a sustained, safe and unimpeded manner to reach all those in need, including the newly displaced people.

In north-west Syria, particularly in Idlib, the humanitarian situation is increasingly dire. This is linked to the massive new displacements since late last year. More than half a million people have been displaced to and within Idlib in these past six months, whether from eastern Ghouta, northern rural Homs, Yarmouk or other parts of Idlib itself. There is a

growing concern around military escalation with 60 people reportedly killed by air strikes between 7 and 10 June alone, and armed clashes in the vicinity of the two most recently besieged communities in Syria, namely, Fo'ah and Kefraya. Moreover, improvised explosives have been detonating regularly throughout the area, with over 20 incidents reported in May and two recent incidents in Idlib city itself on 21 June, killing eight people and wounding another 40. In addition, a number of abductions for ransom of medical and health professionals was reported in June, which led local authorities to suspend non-emergency activities for several days.

In Raqqa city, the United Nations Department of Safety and Security and the United Nations Mine Action Service conducted an assessment mission on 13 and 14 June. While the United Nations remains concerned that contamination of explosive hazards makes the city unsafe for returns, an estimated 138,000 people have already returned to the city since the withdrawal of the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant in October 2017. Most returnees have settled in areas with comparatively less infrastructure and less explosive hazard contamination. There has been a reduction in the average number of blast-related casualties reported by health facilities from over 170 per month in November and December 2017, to an estimated 43 in April. That is the most recent data that we have.

Access to basic services within Raqqa city continues to gradually improve with hospitals reopening and electricity re-established in rural areas to the north of the city, as well as other infrastructure sites. The rehabilitation of the water network within Raqqa city continues at too slow a pace. Only 50 per cent of the city is reportedly receiving water through the network, and it is often in insufficient quantities. In neighbourhoods that do have access, the water network supply is often intermittent with concerns about poor water quality contributing to health risks. The United Nations and its implementing partners continue to provide humanitarian assistance to those in Raqqa city and throughout Raqqa governorate, reaching nearly 300,000 people every month.

Further to the west, 136,000 individuals are estimated to remain in Afrin district, including over 40,000 people in Afrin city. Another 134,000 individuals from Afrin district remain displaced in the Tell Rifaat subdistrict, Nubul and Zahra towns and the surrounding communities. Some limited return movements to Afrin district took place in May when some 3,000 to 5,000 individuals reportedly returned to that district.

The humanitarian access situation in Afrin district continues to improve, and while Turkey and the Turkish authorities provide the majority of the response in those areas, the United Nations — through its cross-border humanitarian partners — is also contributing to life-saving services and activities in the district. Based on a recent multisectoral rapid assessment conducted by humanitarian partners in May, needs are considered to remain very high, with most health facilities in rural areas closed, many service providers having fled the area and a large proportion of schools, markets and bakeries not yet functional, owing again to the presence of explosive remnants of war and the continued absence of staff, workers and tradespeople.

In Tell Rifaat and the surrounding areas, the United Nations continues to provide humanitarian assistance to the displaced populations mainly from its warehouses in Aleppo. However, additional assistance and services are required, particularly for the people in the rural areas and the internally displaced persons sites.

In eastern Ghouta, close to 16,000 people are reported to have moved back as of early June. Estimates indicate that there are currently 125,000 people living inside the enclave. The United Nations has largely been unable to access eastern Ghouta since the change in control in March. A visit to Saqba and Kafr Batna took place on 14 May, but a full assessment of needs is yet to be authorized by the Government of Syria. Assistance is being provided through the Syrian Arab Red Crescent (SARC) and other local partners. A SARC convoy delivered United Nations assistance including, wheat flour for 60,000 people and food for 45,000 people, in Douma on 10 June. United Nations personnel were not permitted to accompany the convoy or conduct a needs assessment, despite the convoy being implemented under the agreed bimonthly inter-agency convoy plan. Moreover, two inter-agency convoys were deployed in May, namely, to the hard-to-reach locations of Talbiseh, in northern rural Homs, and Tlul Elhomor, in southern Hamah. As was the case for the convoy to Douma, United Nations personnel were not permitted to participate in the two convoys. The Syrian Arab Red Crescent delivered the United Nations multisectoral assistance for 92,750 people in Talbiseh, as well as food assistance for 12,000 in nearby Al-Jabriya village. Yesterday multisectoral assistance was delivered to

107,500 people in Al-Rastan, in northern rural Homs. Initially United Nations personnel were not authorized to accompany that convoy. However, following intense negotiations, including with the help of the Russian Federation, the Syrian authorities amended their decision to allow a United Nations presence, as well as the delivery of all medical and health items.

The World Health Organization (WHO) has documented reports of nearly 700 attacks on health facilities in Syria since early 2014, with 112 confirmed attacks already this year. We are now at par with the number of attacks registered for all of last year. That is more than 16 per month — one attack every other day, on average. Syria now accounts for nearly 70 per cent of all reported attacks on health-care facilities documented by the World Health Organization worldwide. According to WHO, it is "the deadliest place in the world for health workers". Let me highlight our efforts to prevent such attacks from occurring.

Since March, the United Nations has deconflicted more than 500 humanitarian premises and sites with the Russian Federation, the United States-led coalition against the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant, and Turkey. Those sites were deconflicted in an effort to prevent them from being targeted by mistake or incidentally. Yet four of those deconflicted sites — all of them health facilities — were hit, in eastern Ghouta and northern rural Homs on 20 March, 6 April and 29 April. That is four too many. We must all ensure that none of our deconflicted sites is hit or damaged unlawfully.

Late last year, the Council requested the Secretary-General to conduct a written review of United Nations humanitarian cross-border operations. A report (S/2018/617) was issued this past week. I will not go through all of its details and findings, but will make a few points on the impact of our cross-border operations on the people in need in Syria.

As the Council knows, nearly 5 million people are in need in areas that are more accessible via cross-border operations than from within Syria. Of those, 2.67 million people are in areas solely accessible via cross-border operations. Those are people without access to assistance from within Syria. From July 2014 to April of this year, a net total of 3.7 million people received food assistance, many of them on a monthly basis; 4.7 million people received sanitation and hygiene assistance; education supplies were delivered to 946,000 people; and nutrition assistance was provided to 611,000 people. Some 21.1 million medical treatments and procedures were conducted in 82 hospitals and 70 mobile clinics, which are operational and supported by medical supplies provided by the United Nations and its humanitarian partners through cross-border operations.

The year 2018 has seen a rapid evolution of the conflict, with shifts in control of territory, mass movements of people and nearly an additional 1 million people displaced. While geographical space for operations has shrunk as areas in the south-east of Idlib have transitioned in control, the size of the population being supported by United Nations cross-border operations has actually increased and the needs of people have become even more acute. For example, in 2014, when resolution 2165 (2014) was adopted, Idlib's population was estimated at 1.9 million. Today it stands at 2.5 million, with half of that number representing displaced people. Resolution 2165 (2014) was adopted out of a dire humanitarian need and imperative, with millions of people in need of assistance who were inaccessible from within Syria. As long as people remain inaccessible from within Syria, which remains the case today, cross-border humanitarian deliveries continue to be the indispensable lifeline for those millions of Syrians dependent on humanitarian assistance to survive.

The President (*spoke in Russian*): I thank Mr. Ging for his briefing.

I shall now give the floor to those members of the Council who wish to make statements.

Mr. Cohen (United States of America): I thank Special Envoy De Mistura and Director Ging for their briefings this morning.

We are no closer to peace in Syria and no closer to addressing any of the Security Council's concerns about the Al-Assad regime's denials of humanitarian access. The situation in the south-west de-escalation zone has become extremely serious. On Monday during the Council's meeting on threats to international peace and security in the Middle East, the Russian representative said,

> "No one has done more than Russia ... [to] reduce the level of violence" (*S/PV.8293, p. 28*).

That is just not true. The United States is deeply concerned about the Syrian regime's new offensive in the south-west, with direct support from Russia,

where ongoing air strikes and barrel-bomb, artillery and rocket attacks are taking a significant toll on the civilian population. That is a part of the country that had enjoyed relative calm for almost a year because all parties were abiding by the de-escalation zone. But at least 45,000 people are now confirmed to have fled their homes in southern Syria since the beginning of the offensive, just 12 days ago. We are now hearing that that number might be as high as 70,000.

It is deeply alarming that we see are seeing an additional escalation in the south-west despite formal arrangements to keep that area calm. When Jordan, Russia and the United States established the south-west de-escalation zone last year, the terms were clear. Above all, there was to be a ceasefire that would allow the parties to engage in combating extremist and terrorist groups designated as such by the Security Council. The arrangement remains in place, and the United States and Jordan have upheld our commitments in good faith, but now the situation is changing. Once again, Russia is justifying a military offensive by the Al-Assad regime by saying that more than half of the de-escalation zone is controlled by terrorists. That is just not true. The predominant armed opposition groups operating in the de-escalation zone belong to the moderate Free Syrian Army. The de-escalation arrangement does not allow for military operations against its members. Rather, it only allows for combating the Islamic State in Iraq and the Sham, the Al-Nusra Front, Al-Qaida and other terrorist groups as designated by the Council.

For years, the Al-Assad regime and Russia have justified brutal assaults on civilian populations and infrastructure, schools, bakeries and hospitals under the pretext of counter-terrorism. We are now seeing the same pattern in the south-west. The United States can confirm that Russia itself launched air strikes in the south-west de-escalation zone in recent days. To be clear, the unilateral military operations under way by the Al-Assad regime and Russia in south-west Syria represent a violation of the ceasefire arrangement reaffirmed by President Trump and President Putin. The United States remains determined to keep its commitment to the ceasefire. We urge our Russian partners to also uphold the ceasefire that it helped establish in partnership with Jordan and the United States. We further urge Russia to take immediate steps to de-escalate violence in the south-west and throughout the whole of Syria consistent with previous Security Council resolutions.

The Council has already witnessed the horrific suffering of the people of eastern Ghouta during a ruthless assault by the regime and Russia in which thousands were killed and displaced. Russia yet again appears to be choosing a military rather than a political option It is incumbent upon those sitting at this table, and the international community more broadly, to demand that this escalation of violence in Syria stop immediately. In addition, the offensive in south-west Syria is threatening the vital Al-Ramtha border crossing, which the Council has authorized for cross-border humanitarian deliveries. A closing of the crossing would inflict untold suffering on civilians who depend on life-saving assistance.

It is vital that cross-border humanitarian aid deliveries continue to serve the millions who depend upon them. In last week's report on cross-border humanitarian operations, the Secretary-General asserted that,

> "[t]he full and complementary use of all delivery options, both from within the country and from neighbouring countries, is necessary in order to gain access to people in need" (*S/2018/617, para. 29*).

Because the regime routinely fails to facilitate humanitarian assistance and often removes medical items and other aid from convoys, it is vital that the Council use its authority to support the continuation of cross-border operations. Alternative proposals from Council members on implementing a new humanitarian operations mechanism that requires the Syrian regime's approval are out of step with reality. Most importantly, those new proposals will harm the Syrian people. We cannot put humanitarian assistance and the cross-border mechanism that ensures its delivery in jeopardy.

As always, the need for a political solution to end this crisis is obvious. The United States urges that a constitutional committee be formed as quickly as possible under United Nations auspices. If such a committee is to work and lead to a lasting settlement, it must be inclusive. That is why we support the efforts of the United Nations to include representatives of civil society, women and the opposition from the Syrian negotiations committee. The United Nations must be given a free hand to determine the committee's composition, scope of work and schedule. The statement from Russia's conference in Sochi in January makes it clear that the United Nations has

the authority to make decisions about who sits on the constitutional committee, and that must be respected. Lastly, we reiterate our commitment to the Geneva process and the full implementation of resolution 2254 (2015). Geneva remains the sole legitimate venue for a peaceful resolution of the Syrian conflict. Council members around this table often reiterate that message, but actions on the ground appear to suggest that some are hedging their bets and seeking to create alternatives to Geneva. We must not delay progress on the political process any further.

The fact that we were able to work with Russia on a de-escalation arrangement that held for nearly a year shows that when we have the political will we can help reduce violence and suffering in Syria. Progress is possible, and that is why the United States remains committed to the de-escalation agreement and to working with the Council to support peace in Syria. Like Special Envoy de Mistura, we will not give up.

Mr. Delattre (France) (*spoke in French*): At the outset, I would like to thank Mr. Staffan de Mistura for his comprehensive and objective briefing. We assure him of our full support. I also thank Mr. John Ging for his instructive briefing on the catastrophic humanitarian situation in Syria.

I will start with our concerns about the situation on the ground, particularly the ongoing offensive in south-western Syria. I will then touch on the extremely dire humanitarian situation. Finally, I will emphasize that the situation makes it even more essential to launch an inclusive political process capable of uniting Syrians.

The relentless logic of military operations continues in Syria. For the past week we have seen the regime resume its attacks on the opposition in south-western Syria, in a region inhabited by 700,000 civilians. There have been several air attacks on the city of Dar'a since 23 June. This relentless strategy, which represents the worst possible outcome for the civilian population, is sadly familiar. As in Damascus, Homs, Aleppo or eastern Ghouta, the goal of the air attacks is to force the opposition groups to surrender using methods of war that are contrary to humanitarian law. Another operation in southern Syria is paving the way for new sieges that will starve out the population and result in more forced displacements and restrictions on humanitarian assistance. Moreover, that offensive is in an extremely sensitive border area and could have direct consequences for the security and stability of Israel and Jordan. In that connection, I would like to recall France's commitment to the security of the United Nations Disengagement Observer Force, in which the Blue Helmets operate under difficult conditions in the Golan Heights, and which should be maintained at all times. Another wave of refugees could destabilize neighbouring countries for the long-term, particularly Jordan, which has already taken in so many Syrians.

These developments are all the more worrying given that the diversity of the forces present in south-western Syria presents a real risk of regional escalation. The territories targeted in the offensive are part of the de-escalation zone in south-western Syria established by the United States, Russia and Jordan in July 2017. France therefore calls on everyone, beginning with the Russians, to honour their commitments in order to put an immediate end to the offensive. Russia must honour the agreement reached a year ago and immediately ensure the cessation of hostilities.

In this troubling context, the continuing catastrophic humanitarian situation is deplorable. In Idlib, eastern Ghouta and elsewhere, the humanitarian situation continues to be particularly alarming. Very rarely do convoys have access to the population, while the needs of the population are immense. The regime is taking on a particularly grave responsibility in that regard. The systematic and deliberate obstruction of humanitarian aid is unacceptable, especially the Syrian regime's systematic removal of medical materials from convoys, including vaccines for children. The influx of displaced persons renders the situation even more critical, particularly in Idlib. All the parties must guarantee total and unhindered humanitarian access, coordinated by the United Nations, and, finally, medical infrastructure and personnel, which are still being attacked, must be protected.

I welcome the Secretary-General's report on humanitarian cross-border assistance (S/2018/617 and S/2018/619). Cross-border assistance continues to play a vital role in enabling aid to be sent along the most direct routes. The mechanism is transparent, effective and fully dedicated to the people in need. The neighbouring countries have given the mechanism their unequivocal support and call for it to continue. It is therefore our responsibility to ensure that it is preserved.

Considering the risk of the fatigue over this issue that peeps through here and there, we must all realize that we cannot turn away in the face of the

continuing military operations and humanitarian disaster in Syria. We must be particularly careful not to let the potential next chapter of the Syrian tragedy, the regional expansion of the conflict, be written. These problems make launching a credible political process more urgent and necessary than ever. It may be too soon for a Syrian Dayton agreement, but we are seeing the first encouraging signs of a true political process. The road map is clear. We must fully support the efforts of the United Nations in Geneva to promote areas of convergence among the primary parties in the Syrian crisis.

In that regard, the discussion on 18 June between Mr. de Mistura and the three Astana guarantors, followed by another on 25 June with the members of the Small Group of the Global Coalition, should enable the launch of a constructive dialogue with a view to reaching a lasting and credible political solution in accordance with resolution 2254 (2015). The short-term goal is the establishment of a constitutional committee. We are encouraged by the willingness of the parties to work constructively for the establishment of such a committee, composed of one third members designated by the regime, one third opposition members and one third independents. This is a modest but necessary stage that is showing initial progress of a kind we have not seen for months and that could potentially be a turning point towards a true political process. We hope that is the case. That is why we are encouraging the Special Envoy to continue to work actively on appointing the 50 independent representatives in order to ensure that neither the regime nor the opposition has a majority. We urge him to define the modalities of work for the committee as soon as possible.

The demanding path towards a political solution based on an intra-Syrian agreement also requires the holding of free and transparent elections, organized and monitored by the United Nations, enabling all Syrians, in Syria and abroad, to have a voice, and with the active participation of women in the political process. In that connection, France supports a 30 per cent minimum participation rate of women in the process.

Those two elements — the constitutional aspect and the elections — require a neutral, secure and impartial framework for the Syrians to express themselves freely that is guaranteed by confidence-building measures. That is the very aim of the efforts under way by France and its partners to ensure coordination between the Small Group of the Global Coalition and the Astana process. Our goal is not to create a process devoid of substance but to bring together the efforts of the parties with leverage in Syria to better support the mediation of the Special Envoy.

During the debate the day before yesterday (see S/PV.8293), the Russian Deputy Minister for Foreign Affairs and Director of the Middle East and North Africa Department, Mr. Sergey Vershinin, advocated a political settlement of the Syrian crisis through constructive dialogue. Based on the shared conviction that there can be no military solution to the Syrian conflict, let us be mindful of working jointly for a lasting political solution.

It is high time that we unite behind the United Nations process in Geneva. That is in the interests of us all, above all the Syrians. In that regard, France is ready to engage with the Russian Federation and all actors with leverage, whether on the ground, on the economic front or in international bodies, in order for the United Nations mediation to succeed. We believe that today that is possible. Let us get to work. There is no time to lose.

Ms. Pierce (United Kingdom): I would like to thank Mr. Staffan de Mistura and Mr. John Ging for their briefings. Through them, allow me once again to thank their teams on the ground, which are doing good work in very difficult circumstances.

As there was positive news on the political front and as we do not often have such news, I would like to start by talking about that. We are very grateful to Mr. De Mistura for his leadership and everything that he has done to drive the political process forward. I think that the recent meetings of the Astana guarantors and the Small Group of the Global Coalition in Geneva underline the centrality and primacy of the United Nations Geneva process. I fully agree with the French Ambassador about the United Nations being the best placed to decide how to take the constitutional committee forward and to ensure that Syrians from the full range of political perspectives and civil society are represented on that committee. It was very welcome to hear what Mr. De Mistura had to say about women's participation in particular. I thank him for referring to the 30-per-cent minimum that we had put in our letter with our Peruvian and Swedish colleagues. When I was posted to the United Nations in Geneva, I in fact met some of those Syrian women. They are very impressive, energetic and, for the most part, secular, and they have

a contribution to make. That is therefore extremely good to hear. I think that the committee represents an important step forward in the political process.

However, as well as addressing fundamental constitutional questions, we also believe that the process needs to make real progress towards creating a calm, safe and neutral environment. That will ultimately be essential if there are ever to be free and fair elections. We believe that we should build on emerging areas of common ground between key international actors. For our part, we, the United Kingdom, remain committed to supporting the political process and a pragmatic political settlement that brings an end to the conflict and that also ensures regional stability. However, we are concerned about the fact that developments such as the recent Law Number 10 casts some doubt on the willingness of the Syrian authorities to engage meaningfully. When he speaks, I would be very grateful to hear an assurance from the Syrian Ambassador about the commitment to the political process.

I said that the political process had made some positive steps forward recently. As the two previous speakers pointed out, that cannot in any way be said of the situation on the ground or of what Mr. De Mistura calls battlefield developments and humanitarian access. We also remain deeply concerned about the escalating attacks by the Syrian forces, backed by Russian air strikes, against the de-escalation zone in south-western Syria. I completely endorse what the United States and French representatives said about not only the risks to life inherent in such action bu. also the significant risk that it poses to regional stability and security. The attacks are in flagrant violation of the de-escalation agreement that was reached between Presidents Trump and Putin in November 2017. It is disappointing for very many reasons, but not least because it casts doubt on the willingness of Russia to abide by its international commitments. I join France and the United States in urging Russia to uphold the commitments under that agreement and to ensure that the Syrian Government abides by the ceasefire so that we can avert a further humanitarian crisis and can make a contribution to regional stability.

Turning to humanitarian access, we also welcome the thorough report of the Secretary-General (S/2018/617). It is clear that the geographical space for cross-border operations has shrunk, particularly to the south-east of Idlib. As areas have transitioned to the control of the Government of Syria, if I have understood correctly, humanitarian access has decreased. Actually, the reverse ought to be true. The fact that the areas have come under the control of the Syrian authorities ought to make humanitarian access easier and more comprehensive. Again, I would therefore be very grateful if the Syrian Ambassador, and perhaps the Russian Ambassador, can address some of that in their remarks, because I would really like to understand why it is so difficult to allow humanitarian access. We talked about that in our last round of consultations. It is still not clear to me why there is an erratic pattern of some United Nations personnel being allowed in but not others and some convoys being allowed through but not others. I therefore really hope that the Security Council can have some more information about that so that we can make some proper decisions about how best we can contribute to the situation on the ground.

In that respect, I would just like to recall that there are still 2 million Syrians living in hard-to-reach locations across the country. "Hard to reach" makes it sound as if one has to forge rivers or climb mountains. It is not that sort of "hard to reach". As far as I understand it, it is an access point. We are therefore back to the point of needing to understand why access is quite so difficult.

I would also like to echo what Mr. Ging said about the attacks on health-care facilities. Those are also unjustifiable. They are outlawed under international law. We call for them to stop. It is not right that aid workers should suffer in that way or that the people of Syria should be denied the opportunity to access medical facilities.

In sum, there are three things that the United Kingdom wishes to call for today. We would like to hear directly from the Syrians and the Russians about their sincerity in engaging in the political process. We would like to hear about the southern de-escalation zone and what can be done to restore the ceasefire and to grant humanitarian access. We would like to hear about the Syrian Government's policies and practices that are creating obstacles for vulnerable displaced people to receive services, food and aid, return home and rebuild their lives.

Mr. Skoog (Sweden): I will speak on behalf of Kuwait later on in the consultations focusing on the humanitarian situation. However, I wanted to just very briefly address the dramatic escalation that we see, and I wanted to do that publicly and to express our very deep

concern over the military offensive in southwestern Syria and its humanitarian consequences. I would like to thank Mr. Staffan de Mistura and Mr. John Ging for their briefings today and for giving us the full picture of the effects that that has not only on the humanitarian situation and the population there but also with regard to the political process.

Some 50,000 people have already been displaced. The majority of them are moving towards the Jordanian border. We therefore urge all stakeholders to respect their obligations under international law and international humanitarian law, including the protection of civilians and civilian infrastructure. I would like to very strongly reiterate the Secretary-General's call for an immediate end to the current military offensive. As we have already stated today, there is a de-escalation agreement in place, which has provided relative calm to south-western Syria over the past year. We call on the guarantors to uphold their commitments to that end.

The recent escalation in south-western Syria contravenes resolution 2401 (2018), which was unanimously adopted by the Council in February. We call on all parties to respect and comply with Security Council resolutions and their international obligations, including to reduce violence, protect civilians and ensure full humanitarian access. The full-scale offensive that we are now seeing is in complete contravention of what we in the Council wish to see and what we had demanded, in particular a de-escalation and full commitment to and engagement in the political process. We must redouble our efforts to achieve a political solution, in line with resolution 2254 (2015) and fully endorse, both in word and deed, the efforts of the Secretary-General, Staffan de Mistura and the United Nations-led political process. Let us therefore discuss how we can achieve that solution during our consultations later today and as we move forward.

Mr. Van Oosterom (Netherlands): I would like to thank Mr. Staffan de Mistura and Mr. John Ging for their briefings and express my deep appreciation for the work of their teams under difficult circumstances.

I will address two topics today in the Chamber: first, the escalating violence in south-western Syria, and secondly, the issue of the need for a political solution.

First, we are deeply concerned about the grave escalation of violence and atrocities in the southern de-escalation zone in Dar'a province. We are also deeply concerned about the massive use of violence by the Syrian regime — supported by its allies — against its own people. In particular, as one of the guarantor Powers, the Russian Federation has a grave responsibility to uphold its commitment to a ceasefire. All relevant parties must do all in their power to prevent another humanitarian disaster. In that regard, we also call on the Russian Federation to exert pressure on the regime in order to create room for a negotiated solution.

The risk of regional spillover is simply too great in such a politically sensitive region, as it is close to Israel, Jordan and the Golan Heights. The hostilities have already caused major displacement from Busra al-Hariri and elsewhere. As Mr. Ging mentioned, more than 45,000 people have had to flee in the direction of the closed border with Jordan and many more might follow if the violence continues to escalate. We fear a repetition of the countless serious violations of international humanitarian law and international human rights law by the regime and its allies, which we have seen throughout the war.

Mr. Ging just quoted statistics from the World Health Organization, which has published shocking numbers on the attacks on medical facilities throughout Syria. Let me repeat those statistics. In 2017, 112 attacks took place, resulting in more than 200 casualties. Already in the first six months of the year, the same number of attacks have taken place, causing more than 250 casualties. In Idlib, south-western Syria, such attacks are ongoing and occur almost daily. Let me be clear, the Syrian regime attacks its own people, medical facilities and first responders. All parties must comply with their obligations under international humanitarian law. Attacks against medical facilities and personnel must stop.

All parties should facilitate the rapid and unimpeded passage of impartial humanitarian relief to all those in need, including first responders, such as the White Helmets, who risk their lives to provide assistance. We would like to echo the words of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry, whose report on the siege and recapture of eastern Ghouta (A/HRC/38/CRP.3) was presented yesterday in the Human Rights Council. That siege and recapture by the regime was marked by war crimes and crimes against humanity. According to that report, the people of eastern Ghouta saw the longest-running siege in modern history. We need accountability. The use of the veto has blocked the Security Council's referral of the situation to the International Criminal Court. We will therefore

continue our work elsewhere, in the Commission of Inquiry and the International, Impartial and Independent Mechanism to Assist in the Investigation and Prosecution of Persons Responsible for the Most Serious Crimes under International Law Committed in the Syrian Arab Republic since March 2011.

Secondly, there is an ever-increasing need for a political solution. The current escalation of violence and the dire humanitarian situation further underscore the urgent need for a sustainable political solution to the conflict. We commend the resilience, efforts [illegible] erance of Staffan de Mistura in that regard. Progress on the development of an inclusive constitutional committee is welcomed and needed. We call for further engagement in Geneva, under the guidance of Special Envoy Staffan de Mistura, in line with resolution 2254 (2015). We share the concerns of the representative of the United Kingdom on Law Number 10 and its potential implications for the quest for a political solution.

Mr. Umarov (Kazakhstan): We thank Special Envoy De Mistura for his insightful update and commend his exceptional commitment and determination to pursue peace in Syria. We welcome his multifaceted diplomacy to resolve the crisis.

Kazakhstan welcomes the consultations held on 18 and19 June in Geneva, with the participation of the delegations of the Islamic Republic of Iran, the Russian Federation and the Republic of Turkey. Such dialogue is a step in the right direction to implement the Sochi final declaration and to form a Syrian-owned constitutional committee to promote the political process under the auspices of the United Nations and define its composition and working methods, which are important tasks. Independent experts in various areas should also be invited.

I must agree with my colleagues that the United Nations should be the only platform to move forward the political process. At the same time we understand that without the assistance of stakeholders, it is not realistic. That is why we commend the Special Envoy on his attempts to involve various States of the Middle East, the Gulf region and Europe in the process. Similarly, a revamped regional approach is needed to support both the Geneva and Astana processes, uphold the ceasefire and promote the peace process. We would like to assure Mr. Staffan de Mistura and his team of our firm support for their efforts to move forward the political process.

We also thank Mr. John Ging, Director of the Operational Division at the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs for his comprehensive and informative briefing on the very critical humanitarian situation in Syria. We have carefully studied the most recent reports of the Secretary-General on the implementation of resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017) and 2401 (2018) (S/2018/619) and on the review of United Nations cross-border operations (S/2018/617). The humanitarian situation is grave and deserves our attention. Kazakhstan highly appreciates the activities of the humanitarian personnel of the United Nations, the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, the World Health Organization (WHO), the Syrian Arab Red Crescent Society and other international humanitarian organizations on the ground.

We encourage more cross-border deliveries from Iraq, Jordan and Turkey, in line with all relevant resolutions on the matter. We learned that in May 440 trucks — 19 consignments — delivered life-saving assistance to more than 1 million people through cross-border deliveries. Those operations complement the aid provided by international and Syrian non-governmental organizations that make services from neighbouring countries available to millions more. The work of the Syrian Ministry of Health, in coordination with WHO, and other organizations, under the umbrella of the United Nations, has helped to reach a considerable number of people in need. The Syrian Government must ensure that it improves the level of humanitarian access in several areas that recently came under localized agreements. We also note with satisfaction the fact that there is a reduction in the number of people in besieged and hard-to-reach areas, as well as a marked decrease in the besieged locations.

At the same time, special attention must be paid to Idlib, where nearly half of the population has been displaced and must be rescued. We underscore that the freedom of movement of civilians must be ensured by all parties. All evacuation of civilians must be safe and voluntary and abide by internationally recognized protection standards.

Finally, we voice our support for calls by the United Nations on all parties to safeguard civilian lives

and prevent deaths and injuries, as seen in the Dar'a area. We also support calls for allowing freedom of movement and for protecting hospitals, clinics and schools, as required under international humanitarian law and human rights law.

The hostilities must stop. The delivery of assistance from across the Jordanian border, thanks to the outstanding ongoing United Nations-led efforts, should be sustained, as each month it must reach hundreds of thousands of people in need.

Mr. Lie Cheng (China) (*spoke in Chinese*): I would like to thank Special Envoy De Mistura and Mr. John Ging for their briefings. We greatly appreciate their efforts in terms of facilitating the political process and alleviating the humanitarian situation in Syria.

The international community has been active recently in advancing the political process in the country. The Special Envoy has engaged with various parties to the Syrian question in intensive in-depth consultations on such issues as the formation of the constitutional committee and the relaunching of the Geneva peace talks. Certain progress has been made. It is hoped that the Astana dialogue will continue to play a role in maintaining the ceasefire in Syria and in advancing the Geneva peace talks.

A political settlement is the only way out. The international community should actively support the United Nations as the main channel for mediation, support the Special Envoy in his efforts to restart the peace talks in Geneva, and push the Syrian Government and the opposition to move towards the same goal. The current priority is to move forward the process of establishing the constitutional committee so as to a solid foundation as early as possible for a comprehensive dialogue on such topics as political governance, elections and counter-terrorism. At the same time, all the relevant regional actors should bear in mind regional peace and stability and create a good environment for the political settlement process.

The sovereignty, independence, unity and territorial integrity of Syria should be fully respected. We have taken note of the recent reports of attacks against targets in Syria. We call on the parties concerned to remain calm, act with restraint and avoid taking any actions that may lead to an escalation of the situation.

The Syrian conflict is now in its eighth year. The humanitarian situation remains grave. A large number of civilians have been displaced. China has taken note of the recent report by the Secretary-General on cross-border humanitarian assistance and operations (S/2018/617). We express our grave concern about the suffering of the Syrian people. We will continue to provide assistance to Syria and its neighbours affected by the influx of Syrian refugees, within the limits of our capacities.

We have taken note of the conflicts in parts of Syria. We express our concern and hope that they will not lead to harm to innocent civilians.

Attacks by terrorist organizations in Syria continue to hamper the United Nations humanitarian relief effort. The international community should strengthen counter-terrorism cooperation, harmonize standards and resolutely combat all terrorist organizations listed by the Security Council. We urge the parties involved to work together to exert influence and ensure that resolution 2401 (2018) is effectively implemented. The United Nations and the international community should strengthen communication and coordination with the Syrian Government, provide assistance to all areas in Syria needing it, support mine-clearance operations in affected areas and assist people in returning to their homes.

Mr. Tenya (Peru) (*spoke in Spanish*): We are grateful for the convening of today's meeting and thank Mr. Staffan de Mistura and Mr. John Ging for the important information they have shared with us today.

We would like to stress the significance of the report of the Secretary-General on cross-border assistance in Syria (S/2018/617), which has allowed us to learn more about the functioning of the assistance-distribution system and the verification mechanism. We emphasize the need to preserve a system on which the survival of millions of people depends.

In view of the continuing increase in the number of displaced persons and those in need of assistance, Peru believes it is essential that the Security Council be able to respond to the humanitarian crisis, in keeping with international humanitarian law, regardless of the differences and divisions that the conflict in Syria is generating. We must express our concern about the continuation of hostilities in south-west Syria, particularly in Dar'a province, in the light of the devastating humanitarian consequences it may have for the more than 750,000 civilians who live there, as well as its potential destabilizing impact on the region. We

consider it urgent to address the needs of the thousands of newly displaced people in that area who are being sheltered in makeshift camps near the Jordanian border and remain highly vulnerable. We are also concerned about the 2.5 million people in Idlib, whose situation could lead to further tragedy.

In line with the calls by Secretary-General António Guterres, we consider it necessary for there to be an immediate cessation of hostilities and for all parties to live up to their responsibility to protect the civilian population and allow for the provision of humanitarian assistance in a sustained, safe and unhindered manner throughout Syrian territory. We deeply regret the continued attacks on medical personnel and infrastructure in Syrian territory, particularly in Idlib and more recently in the south-west of the country.

We welcome the valuable efforts in Astana of the working group on detainees and missing persons. We are confident that positive results will soon be achieved there.

With respect to the political process, we commend the efforts of Mr. De Mistura and lend our support to the establishment of a framework of minimum understanding, which has allowed for progress to be made in setting up the constitutional committee, which was considered at his recent meeting in Geneva with representatives of the Astana guarantor countries and other relevant actors. We believe it is important that the Syrian opposition submit a consensual list of candidates for membership of the committee as soon as possible. We emphasize the need to ensure adequate representativeness in the committee and the importance of ensuring a 30 per cent level of participation by women, pursuant to the letter that Peru, as a Chair of the Informal Expert Group on Women and Peace and Security, together with Sweden and the United Kingdom, addressed to the Secretary-General and others yesterday.

The setting up and launching of the committee are undoubtedly complex tasks that require concessions from all parties. We have great confidence in the diplomatic skills and tireless efforts of the Special Envoy, to whom Peru offers its full support.

Mr. Esono Mbengono (Equatorial Guinea) (*spoke in Spanish*): As always, it is with great pleasure and satisfaction that we receive the briefing by Mr. Staffan de Mistura. We wish to express our gratitude for his efforts aimed at achieving a political and diplomatic solution to the crisis in Syria. As the political situation is closely linked to the humanitarian crisis prevailing in the country, we also want to commend the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, under the leadership of Mr. John Ging, for the enormous task it has undertaken.

With regard to the recent developments in the political process, my delegation would like to make the following clarifications.

First, we note with great concern the escalation of fighting in south-west Syria, especially in Dar'a province, which, as the violence increases, is leading to the displacement of hundreds of people and numerous civilian victims.

It should be remembered that the south-west region of Syria is an important strategic territory owing to its proximity to the Jordanian border and the Golan Heights, which is why it is necessary to guarantee and respect the zone of détente agreed by the parties in 2017 with a view to reducing violence. In that regard, in line with the Secretary-General's press release of 22 June (SG/SM/19099), we call for an immediate cessation of hostilities in that part of the Syrian territory and urge the parties concerned to respect their obligations under international law and international humanitarian law, including the protection of civilians and civilian infrastructure.

In order to put an end to these military offensives, it is essential that we pool our efforts and create synergies so as to move forward and give priority to the political process being facilitated by the United Nations. In parallel with the Geneva peace talks and the Astana challenges, the Sochi guarantors must continue to work towards the establishment of a functioning representative constitutional committee that brings together members of the Government and opposition groups, with the participation of civil society, in particular women's organizations.

We very much welcome the meetings hosted by Mr. Staffan de Mistura on 17, 19 and 25 June with the Sochi guarantors and the so-called Small Group, intended to chart a course to allow for the implementation of the Sochi final declaration and the establishment of the intra-Syrian constitutional committee, facilitated by the United Nations within the framework of the Geneva process and in accordance with resolution 2254 (2015).

There is no time for a rhetoric of double standards or for ambiguous or fruitless negotiations. It is time for a frank dialogue between the parties and actors involved, giving priority to constructive exchanges and substantive debates, with a view to finding common ground.

My Government continues to deplore the worsening humanitarian crisis, as described in the report of the Secretary-General dated 20 June (S/2018/619). It is vital that the parties refrain from hindering humanitarian access by the United Nations actors, which is key to assessing the needs on the ground ensure the delivery of assistance to and the protection of civilians.

We continue to call upon the parties and those who have influence over them to allow for safe, sustained and unhindered humanitarian access to those in need, in line with their obligations under international humanitarian law.

To conclude, with respect to cross-border operations carried out by the United Nations, my Government is of the view that the provision of humanitarian assistance on a cross-border basis is essential and must be maintained. We support the recommendations contained in the Secretary-General's report on the review of United Nations cross-border humanitarian assistance (S/2018/617). We are convinced that the observations of the Secretary-General can help United Nations humanitarian entities and their partner agencies further strengthen cross-border operations, as underscored in the report. Close cooperation among the various humanitarian actors is essential in order to ensure that people in need receive such vital assistance.

Mr. Dah (Côte d'Ivoire) (*spoke in French*): My delegation would like to express its gratitude to Mr. Staffan de Mistura and Mr. John Ging for their respective briefings on the political and humanitarian aspects of the crisis in Syria.

Echoing other delegations that spoke earlier, my delegation remains deeply concerned by the most recent developments in Syria, which are characterized as a fresh resurgence of fighting in the south-west part of the country, particularly in Dar'a, which has triggered the flight of some 45,000 people towards the Jordanian border. We particularly deplore the challenging of the de-escalation status enjoyed by the city of Dar'a, which had allowed that city to benefit from relative calm. It is now seeing an intensification of armed clashes and bombings carried out by the various parties to the conflict.

My country further deplores the fact that it remains impossible for the United Nations and humanitarian agencies to gain access to areas previously under siege owing to the number of administrative obstacles and red tape. Côte d'Ivoire wishes once again to call for the protection of civilians and for respect for international humanitarian law so as to ensure safe, sustained and unhindered access of humanitarian assistance, in line with the relevant United Nations resolutions, in particular resolutions 2165 (2014), which established the United Nations Monitoring Mechanism for the cross-border delivery of humanitarian aid in Syria, and 2401 (2018), which called for an immediate cessation of the fighting and the establishment of a lasting humanitarian pause in Syria.

My country welcomes the independent review of United Nations humanitarian cross-border operations, as called for by resolution 2393 (2017), whose recommendations will allow us to further strengthen the Monitoring Mechanism by taking account of the views of the parties concerned, in particular the Syrian authorities, neighbouring countries and United Nations humanitarian agencies.

As the military escalation on the ground continues unabated, my delegation reiterates the importance of a political solution aimed at restoring stability and finding a lasting solution to the humanitarian crisis in Syria. Côte d'Ivoire remains convinced that the military solution cannot be a solution to the Syrian conflict and calls once again on the parties involved to implement a comprehensive and lasting ceasefire and resume political negotiations for a lasting peace under the auspices of the United Nations.

In that context, my country welcomes the various initiatives aimed at relaunching the intra-Syrian dialogue process and encourages the Special Envoy, Mr. Staffan de Mistura, to undertake, within the framework of the Geneva process, all steps necessary to establish a constitutional committee for Syria, as agreed at the Sochi conference.

My delegation welcomes also the consultations that took place on the establishment of such a constitutional committee on 18 and 19 June in Geneva, led by the Special Envoy and bringing together representatives of the Astana guarantor States on the Syrian negotiations. It welcomes the holding on 25 June in Geneva of a

meeting between the Special Envoy of the United Nations for Syria and the representatives of the Small Group of the Global coalition, composed of France, Germany, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, the United Kingdom and the United States of America, where views were exchanged on constitutional progress and ongoing diplomatic efforts, in order to create synergy between international players.

My delegation also welcomes the efforts to harmonize the positions of the members of the Small Group and the Astana group within the framework of the establishment of the constitutional committee, which is charged with drafting a new constitution for Syria, and welcomes also the decision of the Syrian Government to transmit a list of 50 persons to be considered for membership in the committee.

In conclusion, Côte d'Ivoire continues to call on the Syrian parties to choose the path of dialogue and to move the political process forward in order to find a lasting end to the crisis, in line with the road map enshrined in resolution 2254 (2015). It calls on the international community to support the mediation and good-offices efforts of the Secretary-General and of his Special Envoy, Mr. Staffan de Mistura, which are aimed at bringing the Syrian parties back to the negotiating table in the framework of a constructive dialogue with a view to finding a lasting solution to the crisis in Syria.

Ms. Wronecka (Poland): I would like to thank both briefers, Mr. Staffan de Mistura and Mr. John Ging, for their comprehensive briefings. I should like in particular to thank Staffan for having shared with us what he calls cautious optimism and by bringing hope to our deliberations. He has our full support.

Allow me to focus on two points: the political process and the humanitarian situation in Syria.

On the political track, let me once again reiterate our strong support for the relaunching of a United Nations-facilitated political process through the establishment of a constitutional committee. During the conference hosted in Sochi by Russia along with Iran and Turkey, it was agreed that the United Nations would provide assistance with forming a constitutional committee, including help with defining its mandate, terms of reference, powers, rules of procedure and the selection criteria for its composition.

We support an inclusive, Syrian-led and Syrian-owned constitutional committee under United Nations auspices in Geneva. It should be implemented now as a priority, and further steps should swiftly follow so as to enable a negotiated political transition process. It requires the full and constructive engagement of all the parties to the conflict, especially the Syrian authorities, to participate in the negotiations in good faith and without preconditions. We welcome the participation of women in this process as important actors for peace and mediation.

Unfortunately, military logic continues to drive developments in Syria. We still face continuous and widespread violence and violations of international law, including abuses of human rights and international humanitarian law. The most striking example of this are the recent events in the south-west de-escalation zone, where the Government started a military offensive earlier this month. Taking into consideration the recent events in that zone, we strongly condemn the intensification of military operations and call for an immediate end to the violence in the south-west.

The humanitarian situation in Syria remains critical. Safe and sustainable humanitarian access must be guaranteed, as called for in resolution 2401 (2018). Fortunately, after taking control of eastern Ghouta and Yarmouk, the Government has continued to provide regular access to United Nations humanitarian actors, which is necessary in order for needs to be assessed and for assistance and protection to be scaled up.

The difficult humanitarian situation in the south-west of Syria is exacerbated by the military escalation there. Military operations by the Government's forces with the support of Russia have already displaced thousands of civilians in the south-west de-escalation zone, the majority of whom are moving towards the Jordanian borders. In that context, it should be emphasized that there are already more than 2 million people in need in areas accessed through cross-border operations. Deliveries to those areas remain critical and should be ensured by all parties, first and foremost by the Syrian Government.

Humanitarian imperatives should be our primary priority. We call upon all stakeholders who have influence on the parties to the conflict to ensure the implementation of the cessation of hostilities. In that regard, let me emphasize the importance of protecting vulnerable groups, especially children, women and the religious minorities, who are far too often affected by the conflict in Syria.

The recent offensive in the region of Dar'a, in south-west Syria, is also very worrisome. It is taking place in the de-escalation zone that the Astana guarantors committed to safeguard. Necessary measures to protect civilians, as well as safe and sustainable humanitarian access, need to be ensured.

I would also very briefly like to express our concern about the so-called Law Number 10. We underline the need for the Security Council to remain seized of that matter.

In conclusion, let me stress the need for maintaining the unity of the Council on the question of the full implementation across Syria of the Council's humanitarian resolution 2401 (2018). Unfortunately, we are seeing the continuation of a new military offensive. That worries us, as we may again face an increase in violence. The adoption of resolution 2401 (2018) was just the beginning of the process. We call on all stakeholders with influence on the ground to the take the steps necessary to ensure that the fighting stops, the Syrian people are protected and, finally, humanitarian assistance is delivered.

Mr. Inchauste Jordán (Plurinational State of Bolivia) (*spoke in Spanish*): We are grateful for the briefings provided by Mr. Staffan de Mistura, Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for Syria, and Mr. John Ging, Director of the Coordination and Response Division of the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA). We reiterate our full support for the work they are doing.

We must once again express our regret that this conflict has been going on for eight years, and that we continue to witness the constant siege and violence suffered by the Syrian people, especially the most vulnerable populations, women and children. According to OCHA, more than 13 million people require humanitarian assistance, more than 1.5 million people still live in hard-to-reach areas and more than 8,000 live in besieged areas. Also, according to the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, there are more than 6.6 million internally displaced persons in Syria. We regret that in May alone more than 130,000 civilians were displaced from the city of Afrin as a result of the ongoing violence resulting from military operations.

We also express our concern in the light of the escalating violence we are seeing in the south-west of Syria. We call for a cessation of violence, which would allow for the restoration of the previous relative calm that was seen in the region. By the same token, we condemn any attack on hospitals or educational facilities, and we call on the parties to uphold their obligations under international law and international humanitarian law, including the protection of civilians and civilian infrastructure. We underscore the tireless work being carried out by various humanitarian agencies and their staff, who risk their own lives to continue to strive to deliver much-needed humanitarian access.

My delegation calls for the full implementation of resolution 2401 (2018). In that regard, we must highlight the various initiatives that have led to local evacuation agreements that have facilitated not only the entry of humanitarian assistance but also the evacuation of persons in need, including members of armed groups and their families. We hope that those agreements will continue. Furthermore, in the framework of the various Security Council resolutions, we encourage the continued deployment of convoys, including cross-border convoys.

We believe it is important to point out that more than 2,000 requests were approved in the month of May for food distribution by the World Food Programme, as well as for first aid and vaccinations for more than 1 million children and mothers. According to the report of the Secretary-General (S/2018/539), that means that approximately 2 million people received food assistance and more than 1 million benefited from water, food, sanitation and hygiene services. We therefore call on the Syrian Government to continue to cooperate in that area and to coordinate more closely and actively with United Nations agencies and their representatives.

We also draw the Council's attention to the ongoing return of civilians to the city of Raqqa — the report of the Secretary-General indicates that more than 130,000 civilians returned to that city in May alone. We reiterate that, in addition to having to face a lack of basic services, those who are returning must also grapple with the dangers of explosive remnants of war. Clearing Raqqa and other affected areas in Syria of such remnants is therefore essential and must be urgently carried out in order to avoid more deaths and allow people to resume their daily lives. Similarly, we reiterate our concern about the need to safeguard the lives of the thousands of innocent civilians, including children, who continue to move back to the city of Idlib. It is essential to prevent a further escalation of violence in that area.

Against that backdrop, it is important to reinforce the Astana agreements, which established key de-escalation zones, which are among the international initiatives that have helped to reduce violence in Syria. We believe that our common approach to this conflict must focus on adopting measures to reduce violence on the ground, build confidence among the parties involved, alleviate the humanitarian situation and promote efforts to find a peaceful political solution to the conflict. For that reason, the political process must be relaunched on the basis of the various initiatives and meetings that have taken place at different levels bringing together the different parties involved in the conflict.

In that regard, we note the information provided by Mr. De Mistura that he is seeing headway in the establishment of the constitutional committee. Therefore, we once again highlight the commitments made at the Syrian National Dialogue Congress, held in Sochi, which focused on strengthening the political process lead by the United Nations in the framework of the road map set out by resolution 2254 (2015). Those efforts are to be developed through the drafting of a new constitution and the establishment of the constitutional committee, which in our view should be representative and neutral. We hope that the work of the committee will be active and dynamic and will include the participation of all necessary stakeholders in the conflict.

We express our full support for the work being carried out by the Special Envoy to bring together the parties involved within the framework of a dialogue that will enable them to achieve sustained peace in the medium- and long-term. Similarly, we commend the good offices of the Secretary-General aimed at working closely with the members of the Security Council in finding a peaceful settlement to the conflict.

Lastly, we reject any attempt to foster factiousness, ethnic divisions or sectarianism in Syria. The Syrian people must freely decide their future and their political leadership within the framework of their sovereignty, independence, unity and territorial integrity and without any pressure or foreign interference. We reiterate that the only option for resolving the conflict is through an inclusive, consultative and concerted political process led by and for the Syrian people.

Mr. Alotaibi (Kuwait) (*spoke in Arabic*): At the outset, we thank and commend Mr. Staffan de Mistura and Mr. John Ging for their comprehensive and detailed briefings. We reiterate our appreciation for all United Nations efforts in every facet of the crisis in Syria.

Ambassador Olof Skoog will speak on behalf of Kuwait and Sweden during the informal consultations later, as the two countries were the co-penholders on the resolution on the humanitarian situation in Syria. Nevertheless, I would like to make the following main points.

First, we welcome the reasons that Mr. De Mistura just gave to us as to why we should remain cautiously optimistic about progress made concerning the establishment of the constitutional committee. If carried out, that step will be critical to the transitional political process. In that regard, we stress that there is no military or humanitarian solution to the crisis in Syria. The only way to resolve the crisis is through a political solution, which will require all of us to accelerate ending the crisis through such a solution to a prolonged crisis that does not have repercussions only for the Middle East but far beyond the region. In that connection, I underscore what my colleague Mr. Skoog said, namely, that we believe in the importance of committing to resolution 2401 (2018), which needs to be implemented. As members we shoulder an important responsibility to follow up on that consensus resolution and ensure its implementation. The guarantors of the Astana agreement also must follow up on its implementation.

We agree with the assessment of the Secretary-General in his report (S/2018/617) on cross-border operations and humanitarian aid. Providing such assistance is in line with resolution 2393 (2017) and other previous relevant resolutions, and is part of the humanitarian response in Syria. As was just said by Mr. Ging, reliance on such assistance for people in certain provinces is on the rise. We therefore have to maintain and find ways to improve it so as to reach remote and hard-to-reach areas.

Secondly, we share the Secretary-General's concern about the recent military escalation in south-west Syria, to which Mr. De Mistura referred, and its potential humanitarian repercussions. We have already seen some of its negative consequences in the number of displaced persons, which, to date, has reached almost 50,000. Concerning the statistics relating to health-care facilities cited by Mr. Ging in his briefing, we are deeply concerned about and condemn the targeting of such facilities, which is a clear violation of the relevant

Security Council resolutions and most certainly constitutes war crimes. We urge all parties to respect the provisions of international law and international humanitarian law, especially the de-escalation zone and ceasefire agreement in south-western Syria, which had been calm over the past year.

Before concluding, it seems wise to remind all of us that we are only a few days away from the sixth anniversary of the Geneva communiqué (S/2012/522, annex) of 2012, which serves as the cornerstone for reaching a solution to the Syrian crisis. It was endorsed by the Security Council via resolution 2254 (2015) and enjoys the support of the League of Arab States.

The people of Syria, with their rich culture and history, are no longer able to bear further humanitarian suffering. It is incumbent upon us to support the political track agreed by all segments of society of the brotherly Syrian people, which would maintain the territorial integrity, unity, independence and sovereignty of Syria and meet their legitimate aspirations.

Mr. Alemu (Ethiopia): I wish to thank both Special Envoy Staffan de Mistura and Director Ging for their comprehensive briefings.

We all agree that only a comprehensive intra-Syrian dialogue facilitated by the United Nations, pursuant to resolution 2254 (2015), can end the Syrian crisis. In that regard, we reiterate our support for the continued endeavours of the Special Envoy to meaningfully relaunch the Geneva process, with particular emphasis on the formation of a constitutional committee based on the final statement of the Syrian National Dialogue Congress in Sochi. We commend the Special Envoy for conducting a series of consultations with all States and parties concerned. He has indeed been indefatigable in carrying out his work, and we are encouraged that there has been some positive movement with regard to the establishment of the constitutional committee. We took note of the very significant series of meetings he held on 19, 22 and 25 June. In that connection, we welcome the fact that the Syrian Government has submitted to the Special Envoy a list of 50 names to be included among the members of the committee. We acknowledge that the Special Envoy has continued consultations so that the opposition can also submit its list. That is very critical because it is imperative to ensure that the committee be fully inclusive and representative of the Syrian people. As the Special Envoy said, it is also indispensable that the constitutional committee be credible and enjoy international legitimacy.

The post-conflict need for support for reconstruction makes the issue of legitimacy critical. As the Special Envoy also stressed, it is important that it be Syrian-owned, which was also underscored in resolution 2254 (2015). That is also undeniably a principle enshrined in the Charter of the United Nations.

While the Special Envoy has been working tirelessly to create common ground with regard to the political track, there have been serious and worrying developments on the ground. As the Secretary-General conveyed in press statements issued on the 10 and 22 June (SG/SM/19080 and SG/SM/19099, respectively) military escalations in south-west Syria and Idlib are a source of deep concern. As both involve the de-escalation zones, we call on all parties to respect the ceasefire arrangements and exercise restraint. We encourage all guarantors to work together and end current military escalations, which cause suffering and displacement among civilians and pose a threat to regional security. As the Secretary-General stated in his report of 20 June,

> "[t]he creation of a calm, safe and neutral environment across the Syrian Arab Republic that will enable all Syrians to express confidence in a political process is paramount." (*S/2018/619, para. 45*)

In order to protect civilians and civilian facilities, as well as to create a supportive environment for the political process, we stress that de-escalation must be a top priority. De-escalation is obviously also needed to ensure the quality of humanitarian access for the United Nations and its humanitarian partners. In that regard, while the drop in the number of people in besieged and hard-to-reach areas is a positive development, we remain concerned about the lack of safe, sustained and sufficient humanitarian access to all Syrians, based on the assessment of their humanitarian needs. According to the latest Secretary-General report, this year has seen

> "a collapse in the ability of the United Nations and its humanitarian partners to reach people across conflict lines from within the Syrian Arab Republic." (*ibid., para. 42*)

That is why we believe that as long as the humanitarian needs remain staggering, all parties should facilitate safe, rapid and unimpeded humanitarian access so that

aid can reach those in the greatest need. In addition, all pledges should be disbursed in order to sustain the humanitarian programmes. We have taken note of what Mr. Ging had to say about that, as it is definitely a source of concern for us as well.

We thank the Secretary-General for his report on the review of the United Nations cross-border operations (S/2018/617), based on resolution 2393 (2017), which notes that cross-border aid delivery remains critical to ensuring that humanitarian assistance reaches those in need through the most direct route. While we acknowledge that fact, we encourage the United Nations and its partners to implement the recommendations in the report, particularly those that could further strengthen coordination, transparency and effectiveness, so that aid goes only to those who really need it.

Finally, we reiterate our firm position that there can be no military solution to the protracted Syrian conflict, and that all Syrian actors should meaningfully engage with the Special Envoy as he continues his diplomatic work to relaunch the Geneva intra-Syrian talks. The Council should also support the Special Envoy's efforts at this critical juncture.

The President (*spoke in Russian*): I shall now make a statement in my capacity as the representative of the Russian Federation.

We thank Mr. De Mistura and Mr. Ging for their briefings.

Throughout most of Syria, which is under the control of its legitimate Government, civilian life continues to be restored, including with Russia's active assistance. The Syrian authorities are giving major attention to the liberated areas around Damascus and in northern Homs province, where residents are returning. The streets in eastern Ghouta are being cleared of rubble and residential buildings are being rebuilt. Funds have been allocated for repairing medical facilities in Nashabiyah, Harasta, Douma and Maliha. In Rastan and Talbiseh work has been completed on high-voltage electricity transmission lines and transformer sub-stations. It has been announced that rail freight links have been restored between Tartus and Homs provinces.

Nothing like that is happening in the areas of Syria that have been occupied, in violation of its sovereignty, by the so-called coalition, which is making up excuses to remain on Syrian soil a little longer. Months have elapsed since Raqqa was liberated from the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant, but nothing has changed for the better. The so-called liberators, after reducing the city to rubble — medical facilities, bakeries, everything — are doing nothing to improve things and today have been trying to lecture us about morality. A difficult situation has developed in the Rukban camp, which is near the coalition's Al-Tanf military base, an area closed to outsiders, and no progress is contemplated with humanitarian deliveries. On top of that, there are reports of a corrupt scheme there whereby armed groups are charging people who want to leave the camp a steep fee of as much as $500 per family.

It appears that there are delays in getting international assistance to Syria with mine clearance, including through the United Nations Mine Action Service. Meanwhile, a unit from the Russian Armed Forces' International Mine Action Centre has conducted four operations in record time that are unique in both scale and complexity, two in Palmyra's historic architectural complex and in the residential part of the city, and two in Aleppo and Deir ez-Zor, enabling tens of thousands of Syrians to return to their homes. Many priceless world heritage objects have been rescued. I will not read out the statistics about the quantity of explosive ordnance that our sappers have defused, but they are significant.

There is no justification for the hysterics about the so-called Law Number 10, whose aim, contrary to what some have tried to suggest, is not to expropriate property but to protect property rights violated during the war. The Syrians are not avoiding contact with United Nations experts on the issue but are clarifying details and heeding advice.

The pressing issue is restoring areas damaged in the hostilities, and that requires major help from the entire international community with the active participation of the United Nations. Helping Syria rebuild cannot be conditional on any political demands. One way to get started would be to start restoring Syria's health-care sector and local pharmaceutical industry by guaranteeing the possibility of buying medicines and medical equipment from abroad.

The quality of the Secretary-General's report (S/2018/617) on the review of cross-border humanitarian operations is disappointing. There is a gross error on the very first page, where it claims that cross-border humanitarian operations are provided for the areas

not controlled by the Syrian Government. Where did that come from? Resolution 2165 (2014), which established the mechanism, indicates that cross-border humanitarian deliveries are to be delivered to residents throughout the country in need of help.

In abstaining in the voting on resolution 2393 (2017), we sent the clear message that we think it is essential to work to end the mechanism. In a constructive approach, we decided to give the United Nations and the other interested parties time to prepare for the closure of cross-border operations and to lay the ground for a dialogue with the authorities in Damascus about new ways to deliver aid to the entire Syrian population. However, the United Nations has not made use of that opportunity. The report fails to take into account the military and political aspects of the situation on the ground and does not address the core principles of providing humanitarian assistance, including respect for State sovereignty. It is strange that the authors of the report found not a single flaw in the cross-border operations. And yet they exist, as we well know. I would once again like to urge the Secretariat to come up with ways to provide a gradual and agreed-on withdrawal from cross-border operations in the near future.

In the past few days a great deal has been said about escalating tensions in south-western Syria. Incidentally, I want to note that we, like others, are not indifferent to Jordan and Israel's security issues. We should point out that Jabhat Al-Nusra fighters frequently organize attacks on Syrian military personnel and obstruct the achievement of local ceasefires with armed groups that want to lay down their weapons and return to normal life. As we know, the authorities are offering those opportunities within the framework of Government amnesty. The cities of Dar'a and Suwayda, as well as villages that have opted for reconciliation, have been under fire from jihadists' rocket and artillery shelling.

There are other sources of instability. The situation around Fu'ah and Kafraya, which according to United Nations classification is the only blocked area in Syria, remains very tense, and terrorists have intensified their shelling of residential areas of Aleppo. Rather than using their influence to help achieve reconciliation, some outside stakeholders, on the contrary, are encouraging their clients to take offensive action, which can hardly be seen as evidence of being disposed to cooperate on de-escalation. We should point out that none of the agreements on a cessation of hostilities provides for pauses in the fight against terrorists. In Syria the elimination of remnants of terrorist groups continues. On the night of 17 and 18 June, massive air strikes were launched simultaneously on positions of the Syrian army and its allies near the village of Al-Hari, to the south-east of the town of Abu Kamal in Deir ez-Zor province. Dozens of people at the forefront of the fight against terrorism were killed as a result. This is not the first incident of this kind. What good does it do? Who wants to give extremists a chance to to hold their heads high and try to recover their lost positions?

I want Mr. De Mistura to know that Russia is working for definitive progress towards a political settlement on an agreed international basis under the auspices of the United Nations. Mr. De Mistura recently took part in the high-level consultations with representatives of the Astana process guarantor countries, so he is well aware of our firm commitment to an intra-Syrian dialogue. We have been working consistently with the Syrian parties to encourage them to implement joint efforts. At this stage, that is primarily about implementing the recommendations on establishing a constitutional committee that were formulated at the Syrian National Dialogue Congress in Sochi. The Syrian Government has submitted its list of delegates. As we understand it, the opposition camp, whose unity is still doubtful, is in the process of considering this. Ultimately, of course, it is the Syrians themselves who will have to agree on all the necessary details, with the assistance of the United Nations.

In a broader context, the first order of business is to restore normality to the relations between Syria and other States in the region that have been undermined during the conflict, which would significantly improve the situation in the Middle East.

I now resume my functions as President of the Security Council.

I give the floor to the representative of the Syrian Arab Republic.

Mr. Ja'afari (Syrian Arab Republic) (*spoke in Arabic*): I have listened to many opinions and political and humanitarian assessments today in the Council's review of the situation in my country, Syria, on the issuance of the fifty-second report of the Secretary-General (S/2018/619). I have also heard two briefings, from the Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for Syria and the Director of the Coordination and Response Division of the Office for the Coordination

of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA). I noticed a political maturity and sense of responsibility and objectivity in some delegations' statements, while others have presented a false view by reading the situation in Syria in a mistaken and distorted way. I will not go into detail by responding to all the points that have been made, but I will touch on some of the most important things I have heard.

First, at the beginning of Special Envoy de Mistura's briefing, he described three priorities — de-escalation, reviving the political process and bridging the gaps between the various stakeholders through high-level diplomacy. Of course we have no objection to this. However, we do have some pertinent comments that the Special Envoy and the Council should hear. After seven years of a terrible terrorist war imposed on my country, and four years of cooperation with the Special Envoy, he has failed to include combating terrorism in his list of priorities, despite the fact that we are all aware that Da'esh is still present in Syria under American protection, as is the Al-Nusra Front, under the protection of the Americans, the Israelis and others. There are also many terrorist armed factions that have refused to accede to Astana 4, a meeting that was attended by the Special Envoy, who was there in Astana, and which created the concept of de-escalation zones. The reason I bring this up is because one of the provisions of the Astana 4 agreement includes an exception for armed groups that refuse to accede to the agreement. This is not just about Da'esh and the Al-Nusra Front, but about any group that refuses to join the agreement.

Over the past seven years, we have moved from fighting terrorist proxies to directly combating the original terrorists themselves. The terrorism situation is clear now. Two days ago, armed terrorist groups out of Al-Tanf and the Rukban camp attacked the cities of Suwayda and Dar'a, as well as other areas where the Syrian army is stationed. This has been referred to as southern Syria. Terrorists came from Al-Tanf and the Rukban camp, which are areas under the control of United States forces, as we all know. Is it not the Syrian army's duty to respond to an attack by terrorists on two southern towns in order to protect hundreds of thousands of civilians? I raise this question since it relates to the priority of combating terrorism, which the Special Envoy failed to include. I bring it up because we have agreed that the Geneva agenda has four defined baskets, one of which is combating terrorism. We should remind ourselves that the priority of combating terrorism is on the agenda in Geneva.

Secondly, the Special Envoy made one statement this morning that is dangerous and extremely worrying both for us and some others. He said,

> "I want to believe that the Security Council will not allow this [situation in the south-west of Syria] to become another eastern Ghouta or ... Aleppo".

Does that fall within the mandate of the Special Envoy? Is he mandated to tell the Syrian Government and military how to combat terrorism on the Syrian territories? This is not about combating terrorism on the territories of the United States, France, Britain, Sweden, Poland or Holland. We are talking only about combating terrorism on our territory. That is part of our sovereignty, which the Security Council has underscored in more than 27 resolutions adopted by it. All those resolutions start with the words: the Council reaffirms the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Syria. If the Council reaffirms our sovereignty, how can it consider, as was mentioned by one colleague, the Ambassador of Sweden, that what is happening in southern Syria is military aggression? When the Syrian army itself combats terrorism in the south of the country, can we call that an aggression?

My colleague the Permanent Representative of France said that we must protect the White Helmets in the Golan. It is strange to hear such as statement from a Permanent Representative in the Security Council. The White Helmets are a terrorist group affiliated with the Al-Qaida and the Al-Nusra Front. It is spread over the Golan and other parts and is supported by Israel. It is part of the problem that we always talk about. The Permanent Representative of France says that we must protect the White Helmets in the Golan. Does the mandate of the Security Council provide for the protection of the White Helmets or of the United Nations Disengagement Observer Force (UNDOF), which is under the Security Council, located along the separation line in the Golan? What is the priority of the Council, to provide protection for the White Helmets or the UNDOF force? As the members of the Council know, some elements from the Fiji and Philippines units were abducted by the White Helmets and the Al-Nusra Front few years ago, as a result of which many UNDOF posts were abandoned three years ago.

The Permanent Representative of France also briefly made a comment — but I think that it caught

the Council's attention — calling for a Syrian Dayton Agreement. I hope that I was mistaken when I heard that. He said that we could perhaps reach a Syrian Dayton. Fortunately, we started today's meetings by talking about Serbia (see S/PV.8295) and the situation of Mr. Mladić and others at the International Criminal Court. Less than 25 years since the Dayton Agreement on implementing the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina was signed, in 1995, the Security Council is still looking into minute details of importance related to the consequences of a Dayton Agreement. Does the Ambassador of France mean that the internationalization of the situation in Syria by some must come about, just like the Dayton Agreement? Of course, my Government fully rejects that statement.

Mr. Ging talked in detail about the deteriorating humanitarian situation in Tell Rifaat and Afrin area. He is right. However, he did not mention the reason behind the deterioration of the humanitarian situation there, as if the Turkish monster did not exist and he had never come across the Turkish occupation and Turkey's military invasion to Afrin and Tell Rifaat. Worse than that, Mr. Ging praised the role of Turkey for its support and provision of humanitarian assistance to those two cities. Is not that shameful? Instead of accusing the Turkish side of invading part of Syrian territory, leading to the humanitarian tragedy in the north, we hear the representative of the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs praising the Turks for having delivered humanitarian assistance to the part of Syria that was invaded by them.

Today we are considering the fifty-second report of the Secretary-General on the implementation of resolution 2139 (2014). The United States of America, the United Kingdom and France, as well as some influential parties in the Secretariat, have worked hard to promote the resolution since the issuance of the first report on its implementation, in order to harness it to become a political tool and bring pressure to bear on the Government of Syria to implement the agendas of those States. Those agendas consist of interfering in the internal affairs of Syria and destabilizing its security and stability. Instead, the objective of the resolution should have been to assist Syrians to overcome their suffering due to the unprecedented terrorist war imposed upon them.

Apart from the propaganda that some strive to promote, claiming that the Syrian Government is hindering access to humanitarian assistance, the facts show once again that my Government cooperates with the United Nations and other international organizations in Syria to deliver humanitarian assistance to those who need it. That was demonstrated by paragraph 25 of the report under consideration. That paragraph states that last May the Government of Syria approved all requests submitted by the World Food Programme — and I repeat all requests, that is, 2,180 such requests. The Government has also approved all requests submitted by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). I do not know why the World Food Programme and UNHCR are content to cooperate with the Government of Syria, while OCHA is not. That is strange.

What is deplorable is the fact that the drafters of all 52 reports have turned a blind eye to the details of the crimes of occupation, aggression and invasion against Syria and its people — crimes represented by support for terrorism and the imposition of unilateral and coercive economic measures against the people of Syria, which the United Nations time and again annually stresses that they are unlawful and violate international law, the Charter of the United Nations and human rights principles. However, we heard biased testimony about medicines in Syria, as if those who spoke did not know that the Turks have in fact dismantled more than 1,441 facilities and factories in Aleppo. They have moved their components to Turkey and sold them as scrap metal. Most of the laboratories that were dismantled in Syria were in fact used to manufacture medicines. In addition, there are the sanctions, which exacerbate the situation. However, that is not recognized by the Secretary-General or by OCHA or anybody else.

It is truly deplorable that the drafters of the report have ignored the war crimes and crimes against humanity committed by the United States of America and its allies in Raqqa. That was mentioned by the President of the Security Council. Those crimes happened in other Syrian cities under the pretext of combating terrorism, ignoring the role of the Governments that sponsor and finance terrorism, such as Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey, which strive to incite violence and terrorism and spread radical ideologies and hatred while supporting distorted religious ideas. The lack of professionalism and credibility is truly deplorable. They have reached unacceptable levels. That was demonstrated by those who wrote the report who have doubted the findings of the United Nations assessment mission in Raqqa. They made only selective and general references to the report

of that mission. They presented it in a distorted way, ignoring the tragic situation in Raqqa and the suffering of its people due to the grave crimes committed by the international coalition and its affiliated militias.

There are hundreds of thousands of mines in Raqqa. Every month between 50 and 70 returnees die as a result of mine explosions, an issue that some representatives here at this international Organization have refused to address until now. We spent more than six months trying to reach an agreement with the United Nations Mine Action Service (UNMAS) to demine Raqqa. Six months have now passed. The operation was recently halted for two months because UNMAS management insisted on bringing in a French person who is located in Gaziantep. That is how the United Nations programme perceived the situation — without that French person we could not demine hundreds of thousands of mines in Raqqa. Six months have passed and neither the Mine Action Service nor the Secretariat has visited Raqqa to demine it.

It is deplorable that the authors of the report turned a blind eye, for the fifty-second time, to the details of the crimes committed by Israel and its repeated aggression against the territorial integrity of the Syrian Arab Republic, including its continued support to terrorist armed groups in the separation zone, first and foremost Da'esh and the Al-Nusra Front. We must condemn the entire situation because of its repercussions on the humanitarian situation in Syria. However, that did not attract the attention of the authors of the report, despite their professionalism in drafting 52 reports so far. My Government has submitted an official letter setting its response to the report under consideration. I would like to briefly highlight three points.

First, the authors of the report must be held accountable for their violations of the provisions of resolutions on combating terrorism. They referred to Jabhat Al-Nusra, Hay'at Tahrir Al-Sham and other affiliated groups as armed opposition in Idlib. Such groups have been designated as terrorist entities on the Security Council's list of terrorist organizations.

Secondly, the clear politicization by the authors of the report is no longer acceptable. They make the Syrian Government fully responsible for violations of humanitarian law. They turn a blind eye to the real hurdles to the delivery of humanitarian assistance to those in need, in particular the lax conduct of OCHA officials stationed in Damascus, who do not shoulder their responsibilities or carry out their duties. They refuse to visit areas that have been liberated or those where reconciliation has occurred. They are extremely selective in conducting their work and providing assistance, which is supposed to be humanitarian and non-discriminatory. There is also the lack of funding, and some donors link their funds to political preconditions that run counter to the principles of humanitarian work.

Thirdly, since they disregarded the fact that Turkish aggression on Afrin is the primary reason for the displacement and suffering of civilians, what is the objective of the authors of the report?

The supporters and sponsors in the Council of the terrorist group Jabhat Al-Nusra have used today's meeting to spread unfounded and false accusations against the Government of my country every time the Syrian Arab Army makes progress against that terrorist organization in an attempt to boost the morale of the elements in that criminal organization.

In conclusion, my Government reiterates that it will continue to be relentless in its fight against terrorism in the Syrian Arab Republic. We stress our principled position that the solution to the Syrian crisis is a political one, based on intra-Syrian dialogue led by the Syrians, without foreign interference or preconditions.

The President: The representative of Sweden has asked for the floor to make a further statement.

Mr. Skoog (Sweden): I appreciate the fact that all Council members have spoken. Together with some colleagues, including Kuwait, I had indicated that we would like to discuss the political process and have a conversation with Mr. De Mistura on the way forward. However, I understand and respect the President's decision that that will not be possible today. But I hope that we can do so very soon.

Having just heard the intervention by the representative of Syria, I would like to say a few words. I will not go through the several inaccuracies in his statement, including a reference to a remark I made. I would like to say — and I do so on behalf of Kuwait as well — that we should all support the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) and the work it conducts on everyone's behalf.

The following is a joint Sweden-Kuwait. I would like to make three points on the humanitarian situation.

First, as the Secretary-General stated in his report, we are deeply concerned about the fact that 2018 has seen

> "a collapse in the ability of the United Nations and its humanitarian partners to reach people across conflict lines from within the Syrian Arab Republic." (*S/2018/619, para. 42*)

Only a fraction of people in need are being reached, and there is negative trajectory with regard to humanitarian access in Syria. In their dialogue with Damascus, we encourage those with influence — and this is an opportunity to say this directly to the Syrian representative — to step up to the signing of facilitation letters for convoys, United Nations regular programming to areas recently retaken by Government forces and the approval of visas for United Nations personnel, including OCHA staff.

Secondly, we condemn the continued attacks against medical facilities, of which there has been an increase in 2018. We deplore the continued removal and rejection of medical items from humanitarian convoys. Such acts may constitute war crimes.

Thirdly, we welcome the report of the Secretary-General on the review of United Nations cross-border operations (S/2018/617). As cross-line access is almost non-existent, the cross-border modality continues to be a crucial part of the humanitarian response. It is a life-saving modality, as 2.67 million lives depend on cross-border humanitarian assistance. We note that the scrutiny of United Nations cross-border operations in Syria, as well as of the accountability mechanisms in place, is at a level similar to or higher than that in other comparable humanitarian operations.

Finally, I would like to commend the United Nations for its efforts with regard to the humanitarian situation. We look forward to hearing more in due course about the work on implementing the recommendations. We assure Mr. Ging and his staff of our full support.

The President: Of course, we will continue our dialogue on this issue. From 1 July we will all be in the able hands of the representative of Sweden.

The meeting rose at 12.50 p.m.